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ABSTRACT

This curriculum project examines the current Hungarian and Polish educational systems, which have changed, as have the entire societies of these two countries since the fall of Communism in 1989. The project states that, before 1989, it was difficult for a student to enroll in a university, because education was controlled by the state and regulated by the Minister of Education. Currently there are many new private universities, varied as to type. The paper is based on visits to a new private college of journalism and communications in Budapest (Hungary), and the American Studies Center, a department of Poland's Warsaw University. It describes the curriculum at the American Studies Center, where between 175 and 200 students take classes for 3 years, often working on two masters' degrees simultaneously. The paper discusses the University of Gdansk (Poland) and the Central European University, affiliated with Lancaster University in England. It also offers information about elementary and secondary public education in Hungary and poses the following question: "What is the future of education in Hungary and Poland?" The paper maintains that to understand each other, people must communicate. (BT)

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Opening Doors: Hungarian and Polish Educational Systems

"I am here. Those three words contain all that can be said–you begin with those words and you return to them. . . . I am here – and everyone is in some 'here'–and the only thing we can do is try to communicate with one another."

Czeslaw Milosz, one of Poland's Nobel Prize laureates, begins the 2001 edition of his collected essays , *To Begin Where I Am,* with these words. Being teachers, we believe that education will help us communicate and therefore understand each other somewhat better, although–as Claire Kramisch in *Language and Culture,* wrote recently, "Understanding is a small miracle." Education in Hungary and Poland has changed so dramatically so quickly, as has the entire society of these countries since the fall of Communism in 1989, that I find the frequently applied term "transformation" an apt label.

During Communism the educational system, like the whole society, seems alien to us. It was a society in which a person was denied access to a university because he had been a political dissident, a society in which a university professor's career would, at the very least, be stalled if he was not a member of the Communist Party. If a person was admitted to the university, his or her choices of a specialization were limited. Our guide in Hungary, who in the 1960's wanted to study nineteenth-century Russian history and literature, was told by the Party that, yes, she would be allowed to study in Moscow but that, no, she could not study literature but only the history of the Communist party. Prof. Tomasz Goban-Klas , vice minister of education in Poland and a professor at Jagiellonian University, one of the most highly respected universities in

Poland, said that twenty years ago, about one half million students, or ten per cent of high school graduates, continued on to the university. In this elitist system, it was difficult to enroll in a university, but once a student was accepted, he led a pleasant existence; schooling was free, over half of the students received grants and state support, and there was no need to work. The professors were highly qualified (educated before World War II at the Sorbonne or German universities). Education was controlled by the state, regulated by the Minister of Education.

After the transformation, one radical change was the institution of private universities, which expanded quickly. At first, there were three private colleges; now in Poland there are 230 private colleges, and the state colleges have increased by half. Now there are 350 institutions of higher education and 44% or 1,700,000 students enrolled in institutions of higher education, one third in non-state colleges. Presently, in fact, there is some political controversy about the number of schools--perhaps there are too many because accreditation is difficult to standardize, and as preparation to join the European Union in 2004, some colleges and universities have merged .

Under the Soviets, it was obligatory to take a job immediately after graduation from the university. If a person's identification card didn't list the person's place of employment, he could be arrested. Under Communism if a person received a degree in one academic major, he was expected to work in that specialty his entire life. Now, according to Cynthia Dominik, deputy director of the American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw, a person can take electives, and he has the choice of changing careers if he likes. He also can postpone attending the university for two years after he's been accepted.

With the fall of Communism, the preferred foreign language became English, not Russian, which had been a requirement before, and the Russian teachers became obsolete. The Hungarian and Polish governments began a campaign to train more high school English language teachers in three-year programs.

The students have, understandably, also changed dramatically since the transformation.

A high school headmaster in Poland pointed out that before the change, the students were much more politically aware. During the Communist regime, secret libraries with underground publishers and forbidden books flourished. Now, students are more innocent, more carefree and less involved in political activity at school. They are most interested in their future careers and in Poland's entry into the European Union.

Other differences concern reading habits. According to the publisher of Corvina Press, average educated Hungarians before the transformation read ten books a year, but now they read two books a year. The reduction has to do with economics. Now they spend $18.00 a year on books, which under Communism were heavily subsidized because book publishing was considered a government service rather than a business. Some of the publications under Communism were propaganda, but the majority were world literary classics. The publisher of Corvina Press also pointed out how well read in world literature is the average educated Hungarian, who owns one thousand books. One change in buying habits is to be expected; self-help books, especially on finances, are selling very well.

The new private universities are quite varied. Pazmany Peter Catholic University, located near Budapest, is characterized by stunning architecture, which makes use of the former Soviet buildings on the site. The chief architect was Imre Makovecz, a world renowned expert on organic architecture and perhaps the most reputed contemporary Hungarian architect. The areas of specialization of the university are the humanities, languages (modern and Latin), law, and theology. I spoke with a young man writing his master's thesis on the early twentieth-century Irish poet, William Butler Yeats.

We visited a new private college of journalism and communications, which has just opened in Budapest. Its curriculum includes courses in American literature.

We also visited the American Studies Center, a department of Warsaw University. Between 175 - 200 students take classes for three years, often working on two masters' degree simultaneously. Most of the students, who go to the University of Warsaw, do not pay tuition, but the weekend students, many who are already teachers, do pay tuition. They meet every other

weekend for eight-week semesters, Friday - Sunday, for 2 l/2 hours classes. The curriculum at the American Studies Center is as follows:

the first year: 9 required lecture courses

first semester, six lectures:

American literature (18th - 19th centuries)

American political system

American economic system

American geography

America in the world

American history

2nd semester:

American history II

American literature, 20th century

Culture and society in America

Prose seminar (Business and economics, social studies, or culture–literature, history and popular culture)

2 or 3 electives (history, art, business, politics, society)

2nd and 3rd years: seminars for four semesters

The students remain with the same professors for the seminars. The first seminar results in the prospectus for their M.A. thesis. To graduate, the students need to complete their thesis, pass exams in their primary field and also in another academic area.

At the University of Gdansk, in 200-2001, over 30,000 students were enrolled. Like other universities, the University of Gdansk includes different types of students: regular students, (for whom the tuition is waived for those of Polish citizenship) and also evening and weekend students, who are often already teachers. Students choose between a five-year M.A. program

and a three-year license. In most fields, they have the additional option to continue in a post-license M.A. program or to do research for a Ph.D. The academic year, which begins October 1, is divided into two semesters with exams in February and June. Classes and dorms are located all around the city, an inconvenient but comment situation.

Another interesting university, the Central European University, which offers M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s, is associated with Lancaster University in England, but the Ph.D. is awarded by the Warsaw Academy of Science. All the classes are taught in English. The central branch of the university in Budapest includes classes in the humanities, history, medicine, political science, law, economics, and gender studies. The branch in Warsaw, the Center for Social Studies, includes classes in written English and in American literature. Sixty five students from thirty countries, most from the former Eastern Bloc, study there. Most don't pay tuition, which is $2500 a year. Last year there were applicants for the sixty five places. Of these sixty five students, forty four are studying for the M.A.. Some will continue their education, many in the West. Others will teach English. Some will move into business, where their salaries are usually ten times higher than the salaries of teachers. In Budapest, I heard similar sentiments from Prof. Maria Gedeon Santha at Eotvos College, a small college of 150 students. The students, she said, are trained to become liberal arts teachers, but they're often lured away into business because of higher salaries.

The salary for beginning teachers in Poland is $300.00 a month. A full university professor makes about $600 a month. In Hungary currently a teacher makes about $500 a month, and a 50% raise was promised for this fall. A language teacher may make as much giving private English lessons as he does teaching. In Hungary an English language teacher told me that it takes about ten years to save enough money to buy a house or a car. She has three grown sons living at home (majoring in banking at the university), and she is expected to cook a three-course meal when she gets home. So, most university professors--I heard between 70% and 80%--hold down several jobs. They may teach thirty-five hours at their main job and teach in the evenings and on weekends also. Professors are allowed to work until they're seventy; a

professor's retirement benefits may be $300 a month. So it's easy to see why teachers are turning to careers in business. At one high school in Poland, the head master said that to recruit good teachers he offers them such benefits as a day off a week to write textbooks to increase their income.

Since the fall of Communism, there's been a big shift in career choices. In Hungary, under Communism, the emphasis was on the humanities, math, and science, not social studies, where students would begin to question their society. And in the humanities, the emphasis in teaching was on the revolutionary views of the authors. Art and literature might be allegorical; for example, a film in Hungary about the change from farming with horses to machinery showed the brutal killing of the horses. The film was allowed to be shown because the Communist government saw it as the record of progress, moving into the industrial age, but the audience understood it as the director intended, as a condemnation of the Communist regime, which destroyed people as brutally as the horses were killed in the movie.

Now, in the new capitalist economy, the preferred majors are marketing and banking. Teaching, according to a recent newspaper survey, is now about the eighth or ninth most prestigious career in Hungary. Above it in prestige are law, banking, politics, and ownership of a business. Science and medicine are now considered less prestigious than they are in the U.S. Under Communism, physicians and bankers were more often women, but now they're more likely to be men. Also under Communism, women were frequently notaries, which was considered an unimportant job. Now that it's considered more important, more men than women work in the field. One phenomenon I found interesting is that in Poland sixty of the 460 member of the Seym, the national legislative body, are educators (forty are teachers, and twenty are professors). As in the U.S., most of the elementary teachers in Poland are women, and most of the university professors are men. In Poland only about 17% of the university professors are women.

Hungarian textbooks for elementary students still reinforce gender stereotypes. In the illustrations women are associated with home. If women do work, it's in traditional jobs like

teaching. Textbooks show girls playing very simple games while boys go on excursions, and the girls later ask them about those excursions. Girls ask boys for help with math and science.

In Hungary there are changing patterns of the twelve years of public schools: sometimes it's four years of elementary, four years of junior high, and four years of high school; or sometimes it's four in elementary and eight in high school; or at other school, it's six years of elementary and six in high school. These inconsistencies sometimes cause trouble when students transfer. In Poland students attend six years of primary school, three of gymnasium, and three of lyceum (high school).

Before the transformation, the curricula and textbooks were standardized all over the country. Now different texts are used. All the Hungarian schools teach math and Hungarian literature and history, but other classes vary. Since 1993, it's been required that a student know two languages, one at an intermediate level (most choose English) and a second language at a basic level.

For all students who attend a recognized school (state, private, or church), that school receives about $1100 a student a year paid to a local council, which passes the money on to the school.

In Hungary, Prof. Tibor Frank discussed the exams a student must take before he enters the university. First, he has final exams comparable to the British A-levels (comprehensive exams in 4 - 6 subjects), a written and an oral exam in his proposed major at the university. Some universities are beginning to accept the scores from these exit exams instead of the rigorous dreaded entrance exams traditionally required of applicants.

Overall, Hungarian education emphasizes factual knowledge. Perhaps that's why Hungary scored sixth in an international study of education (it was outranked by England, Japan, China,, and Korea; the U.S. was far behind). Prof. Tibor Frank says Hungarian students often lack what Americans might call an overall vision or understanding of a subject. He believes that American students can discuss ideas better than Hungarian students. I heard the same comment from a high school headmaster in Budapest, who said that the students are taught mainly theoretically

and sometimes can't put together information from different subjects or recognize, for example, relationships between history and art.

One change since the transformation is that students leaving high school can apply to as many colleges and universities as they like. Before that, after graduation, they were assigned a school and required to go there. A disadvantage of the new freedom is that students don't know other students, they feel alienated, they don't feel safe, they worry whether they made the right choice.

Because of a decline in students and competition for good students, high schools can now choose particular areas of specialization. Favorite subjects include math, computer science, languages, physical education, and music. I visited a high school on the Buda side of Budapest, Vorosmajor Gymnasium, which emphasizes foreign language. Small groups of ten or twelve can study English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Latin. The school also specializes in math, the arts, music, biology, and computer science. Classes meet 8 - 2:30. This school has 650 students, fifty eight full-time teachers, fifteen part time teachers, four administrators, and a secretary. One problem is that there's no money for psychology, though it's required by law (so the parents have to pay, even though it's a public school). At the end of their last year of high school, students are required to take exams, including a written and an oral exam in Hungarian literature and language, an oral exam in world history, a written exam in math, a written and an oral exam in a foreign language, and a last exam on a subject of the student's choice, which may be related to the student's college major. These exit exams are national. Only the oral exams can be organized at the school. Most of this school's graduates, predictably, major in finance. A few go into medicine and teaching.

We visited another high school in Gdansk, which enrolls about nine hundred students. The class size is thirty two in junior high and thirty six in high school. This school also is forced to ask parents to donate money for extras like computers because the money from the state covers only the teachers' salaries and small repairs to the buildings. All the students take English in high school and also study another language (German, French, or Russian).

If a student fails one subject, he's required to repeat the entire year, so the teachers feel very responsible, and not many students fail. The headmaster suggested that it would be better if their system was like ours in allowing a student to repeat only the failed subject rather than the entire grade.

Both of these high schools, while intellectually very rigorous, resembled our schools in their popular intramural athletic programs and their extra-curricular activities like choir and drama clubs.

So, what are the challenges for the future? Some are very practical. I heard several times that the schools need more computers. For example, the Eotvos College in Budapest has only six computers for its one hundred fifty students. Further, even though Hungary and Poland are known as the success stories of the former Communist Bloc, unemployment is a problem (it's 18% in Poland, less than 10%in Hungary). Because of economic problems, few students can afford the present tuition, so universities can't raise tuition. The incoming president of the University of Gdansk pointed out, as did others, that the need for professors to take extra job will be detrimental to the students. Further, in Poland 4% of university graduates can't find jobs.

In addition, Hungary faces the old problem about educating the Roma, the gypsies, between six hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand living in Hungary. About half of Roma children finish elementary school. About 12% go to college (contrasted with the 40% of all Hungarian students). Traditionally, gypsies don't value education because they can't see any relation between school and their lives. They traveled for a thousand years, harassed by the whole world, unable to plan at all. . There's not even a future tense in the Roma language. They value individual liberty. In Hungary, for a family to receive a government subsidy, the children must attend school, but the Roma still drop out. The Communists tried segregated schools with only Roma students and Roma teachers who taught in Roma. But still the institution of school itself is European, so the Roma continued to view it with hostility, and the drop out rate in the segregated schools was the same as in integrated schools.

A more encompassing challenge is to bring both the Hungarian and Polish university

systems in line with the Bologna agreement and thus to allow Hungarian and Polish students to study abroad. Ten European universities have agreed to implement the same curriculum so that their students can study one year in another country with the same tuition waiver they'd have in their native country. The Bologna agreement specified a three-tier system of higher education: three years of study for a B.A., two additional years for an M.A., and four more years for a Ph.D. Hungary and Poland currently do not award B.A. degrees, so when students transfer they often have problems.

What is the future of education in Hungary and Poland? The new president of the University of Gdansk, whose specialty is history and who began the American studies program, speaks, as did Maria Gedeon Santha, a professor in Budapest, of the need for "thinking specialists," graduates with general knowledge, with a mind set that recognizes the necessity for lifelong learning rather than narrow technical skills that will soon become obsolete. The President also recognizes the need for departments like classics or pure mathematics, departments that don't pay for themselves. He wants graduates to have both a major and a minor field.. He wants more interdisciplinary classes, more international students and faculty, and the ability to communicate well in a second or third language. By "communicate," he means the ability to carry on a real conversation.

So here it is again: communication. Whether in Poland, Hungary, or Texas, in order to understand each other, we must communicate. Education, I maintain even more strongly after the Fulbright-Hayes summer seminar, helps us all communicate. Based on what I heard and saw this past summer, I believe the Hungarian and Polish students are receiving excellent rigorous educations to prepare them for successful careers—and successful lives—in their transformed societies.

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